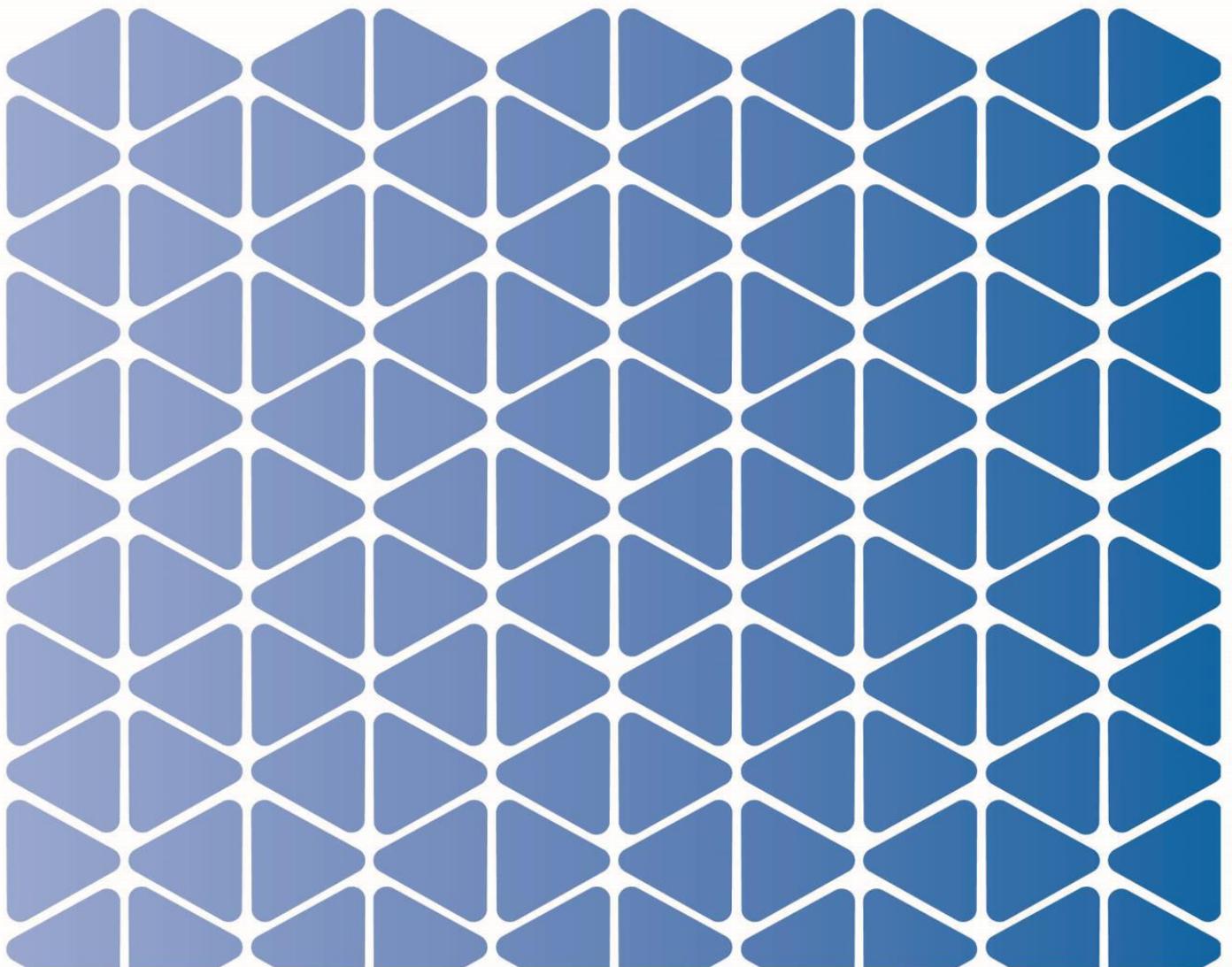




Worcestershire
Acute Hospitals
NHS Trust

PATIENT INFORMATION

RADIOTHERAPY TO THE ANAL/RECTAL AREA: SIDE EFFECT INFORMATION



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Worcestershire Oncology Centre

Improving cancer services in Worcestershire

Introduction

This leaflet will explain possible side effects which may develop when receiving Radiotherapy to your pelvic area.

These effects are individual and will depend on the dose of radiotherapy you receive and the length of your treatment. Everyone reacts to Radiotherapy differently and many people have minimal side effects. Most side effects are temporary and are rarely severe. Acute (early) side effects may start at varying times during treatment and disappear in the weeks after treatment finishes. Late side effects may not occur for a long time after the treatment has finished.

The Radiographers will explain your possible side effects in more detail and answer any questions you may have before you start treatment.

You may also be having chemotherapy treatment at the same time as your radiotherapy. Chemotherapy is the treatment of cancer with drugs. **You will be given specific written information and consented separately for this.**

You will have weekly blood counts while you are having radiotherapy treatment.

Acute (early) side effects

These can occur whilst you are undergoing Radiotherapy and in the weeks immediately afterwards. They tend to be cumulative so may not occur in the first week.

Effects on the bladder (cystitis)

You may experience an increase in frequency and urgency of urination and some people develop a burning or stinging sensation as well. There is also the possibility of feeling the urge to pass urine but then only passing small amounts.

You can help yourself by

- Drinking plenty of fluids and keeping well hydrated. This will depend on weight and body size but the average amount is 1.5-2 litres (3-4 pints.) per day.

- Avoid drinks that can irritate the bladder such as tea, coffee, green tea, alcohol, fizzy drinks such as cola or fresh juices.
Herb/fruit or caffeine free drinks are fine.

Please tell the radiographers if you think you may be developing urinary problem.

Effects on the bowel

You will probably find that your bowel motions become more frequent over time with looser stools and possibly diarrhoea. It is not uncommon to have increased wind and pass some mucous or blood in your stools. You may also experience a bloated and tender feeling in your stomach.

You can help yourself by

- Trying to eat your usual diet and avoid missing meals.

If necessary we will advise you on medications to help control diarrhoea. If you are having chemotherapy as well, these side effects may be more severe.

Tiredness

It is not uncommon to feel tired as you go through Radiotherapy treatment. It can be a combination of travelling to and from hospital and coping with the side effects of treatment. Research suggests that gentle exercise and keeping active can help with the symptoms of tiredness and fatigue. Macmillan Cancer Support have a lot of information available. Please ask your Radiographers for the appropriate booklets.

Hair loss

You may find that you will lose your pubic hair in the treatment area. It will grow back but may be thinner.

Skin

Patients receiving treatment to the lower rectum / anus may get a more severe skin reaction in the treatment area; moist patches may develop and dressings may need to be applied. You may also need to take painkillers for a while towards the end of treatment and for three to four weeks after. Your radiographers will be able to give you appropriate skin care advice.

Nausea/sickness and weight loss

Sometimes people can lose weight during treatment. This can be due to the side effects of sickness, diarrhoea and tiredness which can upset appetite. Eating frequent small meals and drinking plenty of fluids can help.

Let the radiographers know if you are struggling as it is possible to get a prescription for anti-sickness tablets. There is also a dietitian in the department who will be able to advise you.

Other

During treatment you are **not** radioactive. Once the machine is switched off there is no radiation present so you are safe to be around children and pregnant women.

Late effects

These can develop months or years after you have completed your treatment. Modern machines and techniques have reduced some of these late effects; however they are the hardest to predict.

- Bowel changes; these may include loose bowel motions, urgency, narrowing of the bowel and bleeding from the rectum and some problems controlling bowel movements.
- Bladder changes; may include urinary frequency, reduced bladder capacity, and very occasionally leakage and blood in the urine.
- Bone pain; this is a rare long term side effect and can include some weakness in the bones in the pelvis causing pain.
- Changes in bone density; may occur in women as a result of a premature menopause. Weight bearing exercise and a calcium enriched diet may help to prevent this. It may be necessary to have a bone density scan.

Changes to sexual function

In women, radiotherapy can cause loss of libido and a narrowing and shortening of the vagina, which may make sexual intercourse uncomfortable or difficult. It may also cause some vaginal dryness but lubricants are available on prescription.

To help prevent this happening you may be recommended to use a vaginal dilator with some lubricant jelly. These will be given to you during your radiotherapy. They are used to maintain the opening of the vagina, and can help to make future clinical examinations more comfortable for you.

In men, the ability to get an erection may be affected due to the effect of radiotherapy on the nerves and blood vessels that supply the penis. Men may also experience a loss of libido. Your consultant or one of the team will be able to advise you about treatments that can help with these side effects.

Fertility

Your consultant should have discussed with you the effects of your radiotherapy treatment on fertility.

In young women with functioning ovaries, radiation treatment to the pelvis can result in infertility. This is because the treatment brings about a premature menopause.

Infertility can also occur in men having treatment for anal cancer as the scrotum may be affected by the treatment.

When infertility does occur it is often not immediate and you will need to use contraception during and after treatment (your consultant or one of the team will give you advice about this).

There is a booklet giving detailed information about potential late side effects entitled "Managing the Late Effects of Bowel Cancer Treatment" which is produced by Macmillan Cancer Support. Please speak to your consultant or one of the team if you are concerned about long term side effects.

After treatment:

The early side effects from the treatment will continue for several weeks after the treatment course has been completed.

If you develop new symptoms after your treatment is over, or you are concerned that the immediate side effects are not clearing up, you can contact the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist Radiographer on 01905 761420 or the Acute Oncology Service 01905 760158

There is often a simple explanation for these symptoms and they do not necessarily mean you will develop the late effects of treatment.

If your symptoms or condition worsens, or if you are concerned about anything, please call your GP, 111, or 999.

Patient Experience

We know that being admitted to hospital can be a difficult and unsettling time for you and your loved ones. If you have any questions or concerns, please do speak with a member of staff on the ward or in the relevant department who will do their best to answer your questions and reassure you.

Feedback

Feedback is really important and useful to us – it can tell us where we are working well and where improvements can be made. There are lots of ways you can share your experience with us including completing our Friends and Family Test – cards are available and can be posted on all wards, departments and clinics at our hospitals. We value your comments and feedback and thank you for taking the time to share this with us.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any concerns or questions about your care, we advise you to talk with the nurse in charge or the department manager in the first instance as they are best placed to answer any questions or resolve concerns quickly. If the relevant member of staff is unable to help resolve your concern, you can contact the PALS Team. We offer informal help, advice or support about any aspect of hospital services & experiences.

Our PALS team will liaise with the various departments in our hospitals on your behalf, if you feel unable to do so, to resolve your problems and where appropriate refer to outside help.

If you are still unhappy you can contact the Complaints Department, who can investigate your concerns. You can make a complaint orally, electronically or in writing and we can advise and guide you through the complaints procedure.

How to contact PALS:

Telephone Patient Services: 0300 123 1732 or via email at: wah-tr.PET@nhs.net

Opening times:

The PALS telephone lines are open Monday to Thursday from 8.30am to 4.30pm and Friday: 8.30am to 4.00pm. Please be aware that a voicemail service is in use at busy times, but messages will be returned as quickly as possible.

If you are unable to understand this leaflet, please communicate with a member of staff.